

Interview with Franz Reichle, Director of the Film „The Knowledge of Healing“ during the film premiere in New York N.Y. in November 1997

by Jacqueline C. Wootton, M.Ed. for “The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine”, USA.

JACQUELINE C. WOOTTON, M.Ed.: Mr. Reichle, how did you become interested in Tibetan Medicine?

FRANZ REICHLE: I have never produced films to order. Each of my films originated out of a personal need and from the conviction that they would be important for the public at large as well.

For several years, I lived in the Russian republic of Buryatia, in eastern Siberia, where I filmed a documentary about the disintegration of a shamanistic tribe from whose dialect we derive the word shaman, but that, today, comprises only a negligible portion of the population. The majority – besides, of course, the Russians who flooded the region centuries ago, similar to what the Chinese are doing in Tibet today – are the Buryats, the northernmost Mongolian tribe, which converted to Buddhism in the seventeenth century. Until the violent Chinese intervention, Mongolia bordered directly on the Tibetan province of Amdo, where the fourteenth Dalai Lama was born.

Constant small misunderstandings occurred in my day-to-day life during this Siberian phase, which, I felt, was due to my Catholic European character and upbringing. I wanted to build a bridge for myself between Buddhism and Christianity and, in general, a bridge for mutual culture understanding but, for a long time, I did not know how to do this in a film. These were all abstract concepts. For a film, I needed a story.

Nonetheless, I began to research the subject. Because I did not know anything about Buddhism then, I went to the closest Buddhist monastery and spoke to the lamas about what they were doing and its meaning. I met a physician who had been trained as a Tibetan physician and had practice for about twenty years. For the first time in my life, I heard about Tibetan Medicine because, officially, its practice was forbidden in Buryatia until perestroika. I was

fascinated by the simplicity and character of this physician and helped him to collect herbs and dig up roots. I was allowed to observe him during his office hours and to accompany him to his patients' homes. The cures achieved by his medications, composed mainly of herbs, roots, and fruits, impressed me deeply. He said little, so that, at first, I thought it was a hoax. Then I found books on Tibetan Medicine and was glad to find that there was nothing mystical about it but, on the contrary, it was a kind of classical medicine taught in special schools since the seventeenth century.

JCW: How did the idea to produce this film germinate? How did you proceed in your research?

FR: My fascination with this Tibetan physician and with what I read was so great that I absolutely had to tell a broad Western public about it, naturally with a film, and I was happy, finally, to have found the connection to Buddhism via Tibetan Medicine.

I have produced all my previous films myself. This time around I was absolutely clear in my mind from the very beginning that I did not want this double burden of director and producer but only to be responsible for the artistic aspect of this project. I looked for a reputable producer on whom I could rely and who would give me full artistic freedom but who would also be interested in working with me on this very specific theme. This search took almost a year. In the meantime, I conducted more research, which was financed by grants from official institutions and by private sponsorship.

During this period of research, I encountered, by chance, a Swiss company, PADMA Inc., which manufactured Tibetan medicines, the first to do so in the West. The company also conducted clinical trials on the effectiveness of these medicines. This was incredible luck. In this way, my project was already partially rooted in the West, and, of all things, in my native country and my own city of Zurich.

JCW: One wonders if this was coincidence or karmic! Given these different manifestations of the Tibetan tradition, can you describe the basic characteristic features of Tibetan Medicine?

FR: It is fundamentally different from Western medicine, in philosophy as well as in application, although, superficially, the aim of keeping a person healthy is common to both.

JCW: What would you say are the underlying principles of Tibetan Medicine?

FR: Tibetan Medicine does distinguish between the body and the mind or soul but it does not treat them as separate entities; this is impossible. Body and mind are connected to each other during one's life, and most illnesses, according to the Tibetan or Buddhist concept, are caused by the patient mostly by harmful behavior. The patient has the task of correcting or avoiding this harmful behavior, so that fewer disorders occur in the future and, consequently, fewer illnesses. The Tibetan physician perceives whether something has become unbalanced in a human being much earlier than is possible with all the modern Western diagnostic tests and by simply feeling the pulse – he or she distinguishes 48 different kinds of pulse in all. There is no such condition as absolute health but Tibetan physician can give the patient early recommendations on what to change or omit, for example, in eating habits.

All of this means that Tibetan Medicine is not a “repair medicine” like its Western counterpart. Early on, before the onset of a problem, Tibetan Medicine can read the entire human being. Through the mutual dependence of body and mind, it is possible to deduce the entire condition by only feeling the pulse. According to Tibetan medicinal teachings, everything that exists in the cosmos is also present on Earth, in us, in animals and plants, from the same five elements of earth, water, wind, fire, and space. Each combination of two elements, for example, constitutes a type of taste. The six types of taste are sweet, sour, salty, bitter, hot, and astringent that, in all possible combinations, provide 57 different types of taste. Everything that exists can be “read” as taste and can be reduced to the interaction of the five elements. Now, if a person is really sick, that is, the balance of his or her elements is persistently disturbed, it can be translated into taste, and the medication that the physician prescribes must be balanced so that the patient receives that type of taste missing in his or her system. Of course, I simplify considerably with this example. In reality, many

other things contribute, including the eight potencies (heaviness, mildness, coolness, bluntness, lightness, coarseness, heat, and sharpness). It is important to realise, though - and that is another characteristic of Tibetan Medicine - that medications do not consist of a single herb or mineral but always of many. At least 4 to a maximum of 165 components are combined. And they are not essences but raw plant materials, which means that there is not a single active ingredient but hundreds of active ingredients.

Besides treatment with medications, the Tibetans know of many other medical treatments such as massage, bleeding, cauterisation, moxibustion, and more.

JCW: Many people see Buddhism and Tibetan Medicine as inextricably linked, and yet, in the film, His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, explains that "if the physician, who administers the Tibetan medicines, is a Buddhist, he can pray during administration and recite mantras. It can be equally useful if the patient, if he is a Buddhist, prays and meditates when taking his medication. But as the basics of Tibetan Medicine are separate from Buddhism, Tibetan Medicine can still be very useful even if physician and patient are not Buddhists." How do you explain this?

FR: His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, already explained very clearly in His first interview with me that a medication of the Tibetans has a very specific effect, regardless of whether the person is a Buddhist or not, but that Tibetans, for example, upon taking medication, recite mantras or pray, because the Tibetans are Buddhists. Each culture has its own rituals. Rituals in themselves play a central role in the healing process, because they increase forces for self-healing in human beings. This is the case upon taking any medication, including Western medicine. And it is even important if no medication is being taken. Just think about the placebo effect during double-blind studies when patients report improvements simply because these patients assume they are receiving a helpful medication, even if, in reality, they only take a placebo, in other words, an ineffective dummy medicine.

JCW: The film implies that Tibetan Medicine formulations may have a clearly demonstrable efficacy today, in societies that have no access to, or

understanding of, the Buddhist philosophical basics of Tibetan Medicine. How do you view the role of Western science and clinical research in this context?

FR: We people of the West are shaped by our medical traditions in which the natural sciences played, and still play, a predominant role, even if many of us are disappointed or even enraged by small-to-devastating side effects, and many of us would like to turn to alternative methods of healing. But besides Grandma's pharmacy, or perhaps here and there homeopathy, we do not know of anything else that makes sense. We are only just beginning to gather new information. If we now turn to Tibetan Medicine – which is unfortunately, as the Dalai Lama states, incorrectly labeled as “myth laden” – we in the West can only get away from these myths by having our scientists confirm a real benefit of these Tibetan medications. The methods used in our scientific research are not developed to such a degree of complexity that they can demonstrate the complete, or whole, effects of the medications on our bodies and our spirits, but these methods can, at least, demonstrate a large part of these effects. This is very important for any future official acceptance of such complex natural remedies as those from Tibet.

But it would be a mistake to assume that Tibetan Medicine can replace Western Medicine; this would not be desirable at all, because Western medicine has produced great things; think of acute medicine, surgery, dental prosthetics. Both medical systems are complementary, in other words, they supplement each other. If used correctly, there is no competition. Their strengths and qualities are truly different. What one system can do, the other cannot. They should be practiced in conjunction and applied as necessary in a particular situation but, if possible, also according to the wishes of the patient who is, after all, the one most concerned and who alone has the ultimate responsibility for his or her life.

JCW: This would be a truly integrative system of medicine. There was a strong connection to Switzerland in the film and I understand that the film was a big hit there. Why do you think the film was so successful in Switzerland, the stronghold of the pharmaceutical industry?

FR: I am Swiss and already had a name as a filmmaker. In that way it was a “home game”, which surely played a role. The second coincidence is that, for

the first time, Tibetan medicines are being produced commercially in the West, particularly in Switzerland. Thus, it was possible to have local people appear in the film besides many of the “imported exotic foreigners” from northern India and Siberia. That was a great surprise for the Swiss public. But we, with our pharmaceutical “strongholds” in Switzerland, are also especially sensitive to the possible and often highly toxic side effects of our conventional pharmaceutical products, which does lead to vigorous debates and controversies at all levels of the federal agencies. We Swiss are particularly careful about our natural environment and, therefore, turn more easily to the healing properties of nature.

JCW: Let us return to your role as a filmmaker. In the film you create a gentle, unfolding multilayered story. You achieve this in several ways, for instance, the use of the flashlight to search for and scan the tangkas (ancient medical texts). Do you use these cinematic techniques as a metaphor for the hidden and mystical aspects of the traditional Tibetan medical system?

FR: It is particularly important to me to develop a specific form for each of my films, a form which is created directly from the contents or, more specifically, from the perceptions I have gained from working through the substance of the theme and the vision which then presents itself. Every single take (or scene if take might be misunderstood) for the film has several reasons and use of this take can have more than one function. For example, the scene can be apparently dramaturgical, narrative, or informative. But, as in any work of art, the take should also contain a message on a higher level, as a symbol or a metaphor. Consequently, the shots of the medical scrolls from the seventeenth century – lit with a flashlight – can certainly be interpreted as a “metaphor”. In the beginning of the film they immerse the viewer in the ancient history of Tibetan Medicine with it, as you say, “mystical” aspects, which are attached to it unjustly but which are still there. The flashlight is used to seek and illuminate fragments of this medicine, for which connections and real meanings are explained later on in the film and which are thereby demystified. At the same time, these fragments capture a large spectrum of Tibetan Medicine. Simultaneously, these pictures retain an authentic character, as do all photographs in this film. These amazing scrolls are kept in a dark archival room in Siberia. By the way, some of these medicine tangkas will be shown next year

for the first time to the general public in a large exhibition in America by Pro-Cultura.

The many-layered film montage is therefore a direct result of the truly manifold and complex Tibetan Medicine. Of course, I had to restrict myself to the most important aspects in this film. But so that the film, with its hopeful aspect, does not leave the viewer out in the cold, I have issued a book with the same title "The Knowledge of Healing" with important background information and fascinating further details, with tables, lists of medical indications, and addresses of Tibetan medical institutions. And there is also an audio compact disc with the title "Healing Meditations", with mantras, prayers and sounds of traditional Tibetan musical instruments, which were impossible to include in full length in the film.

JWC: Franz Reichle, congratulations on the success of your film and thank you for your time.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Jacqueline C. Wootton, M.Ed., managing editor of The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine, a peer-reviewed Journal, writes our WebWatch column. In this interview, Ms. Wootton takes us off the beaten track to shed light on Tibetan Medicine as viewed by a noted filmmaker who has investigated it and captured some of its aspects on film.

The Knowledge of Healing" is the first full-length documentary film on Tibetan Medicine, one of the most highly developed medical Systems dating back to the twelfth Century. This film is no dry documentary. It is a moving and honest depiction of a vibrant.....

teachings and twentieth-century developissues are subtly understated and cannot help but emerge, as in one particularly poignant scene in which a Tibetan nun describes the torture she endured at the hands of her Chinese captors.

The action takes place at three different locations. At Dharamsala, seat of the exiled Tibetan government in northern India, Dr. Tenzin Choedrak, former chief medical officer, Tibetan Medical and Astro Institute, Dharamsala, India, and personal physican to His Holiness, Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama, intro-duces the basic tenets of Tibetan Medicine, and His Holiness, the Dalai Lama

disease, according to Tibetan Medicine. In Buryatia, Siberia, the Tibetan doctor Chimit-Dorzhi Dugarov, who practices there treats chronically sick patients continuing a tradition brought to the area by a north Mongolian tribe that espoused Buddhism in the seventeenth Century The third element of the film features research centers in Vienna and Israel as well as the specialized plant in Switzerland, PADMA Inc., where Karl Lutz, originally a pharmaceutical entrepreneur, developed modern production of Tibetan herbal formulas in the West with impres-sive and unanticipated results.

The film's director, Franz Reichle, is a freelance filmmaker who also teaches filmmaking courses in Zurich, Switzerland. He lived for 5 years in Buryatia, where he became familiar with Tibetan Medicine and spent 3 years researching and making "The Knowledge of Healing." This interview took place in November 1997, at the film's New York premiere.